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Seed Saving CSA Farmers

My fellow and I tend three acres of biodynamically grown vegetables for the nearly hundred families who are part of our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) garden here in southwestern New Hampshire. We farm with the help of two teams of draft horses, several greenhouses, pastures, hayfields, woods, small wetlands, an apple orchard, a pond, a teenage daughter, and lots of seeds.

Over our sixteen years of farming together, we've grown many, many seeds, and we've also saved seeds: lettuce and basil and beets, tomatoes and sweet peppers, butternut squash and beans. But just in case the constant vagaries of farming – weather and soil and bugs and plants and hungry critters – aren't enough to keep us laughing (or crying), we like to reminisce in the slower winter months about our first funny, wacky, earnest attempts at seed-saving . . .

Attempt Number One: Lettuce

It is the first year on our new farm, and we are in the thick of everything: getting our fields into shape, getting to know our new team of workhorses and our new community, starting a CSA garden, caring for our teething toddler daughter, and working part-time off the farm to make ends meet. My farming fellow and fellow farmer, who is

boundlessly enthusiastic and has the energy to match, decides this would be an ideal time to start saving seeds.

I, however, as the more sober and the sleepier farmer, am a little doubtful about adding another project to our full days and nights. “But do you know how to do it?” I ask. “How much time is it going to take? How much garden space?”

“Oh, sure, I know how to do it,” he answers confidently, “It’s easy! It hardly takes a minute, and just a tiny bit of space in the garden.”

“Great,” I say. “We’ve got just about one extra minute, and just about one tiny bit of extra space.”

Early in the spring, my fellow goes ahead and plants twenty cells of lettuce in one of the greenhouse flats. He will start a seed-saving revolution with the “Sierra” variety of lettuce, since he loves it, and the seed companies are threatening to drop it. He will save this seed for the good of the world!

Over the weeks, he waters the plugs, thins them, admires their vigorous germination and growth. “Look at that!” he says, pleased.

“Look at everything else!” I answer, pointing to the towering tomatoes and onions and eggplant and peppers and basil and, and, and . . . They are all growing vigorously in here, too, and we are in a full-fledged spring panic of getting into the ground everything that will feed all our new CSA members and us for the next few months. The twenty seed-lettuce plugs are gently pushed aside, where they continue to grow, happy in the constant temperatures of the greenhouse.

Not long after, racing through the greenhouse, my fellow realizes that the little lettuce plants have nearly sapped the nutrients of their soil mix. The lettuce is losing its green sheen and beginning to yellow. Quickly he transfers them to the mini greenhouse outside, where they will harden off, so we can get them into the ground – right away!

Two weeks later, we lie, gasping after the efforts of our June 1 transplanting deadline, and my fellow remembers the seed lettuce. “Drat,” he says. “There’s no room for it anywhere now.”

He is ready to toss the sad little plugs into the compost, but I hate to give up on any crop, no matter how beleaguered it might be. The lettuce, is after all, still alive, and such a nice hardy variety, surviving on so little. I persuade him that there is a perfect space for it, a perfect tiny bit of extra space, at the far end of the garden.

Now my fellow looks a little doubtful. The far end of the garden is a bit beleaguered itself. It's hard to get waaaay down there with the hoe, when there are so many weeds clamoring for attention on the way. Nevertheless, with true farmerly optimism, my seed-saving CSA farmer plants the tough little plugs.

We weed the lettuce whenever we can, but once harvesting for our CSA members gets added to all the other tasks, it is once again virtually on its own. Finally, late in July, we make a concerted effort to at least visit the lettuce, to see how it has fared.

And we are delighted! Amazed! One head has thrived, despite everything! It has stretched up beyond the weeds and made flowers, made *seeds*! And what hardy, indestructible seeds they must be!

Attempt Number Two: Carrots

Flushed by his single lettuce success, my fellow joins a seed-saving-and-sharing group, which only whets his seed-saving appetite. This year he is so excited that he decides to try something new: a biannual crop. To save seeds from a biannual, he will plant the seed the first year, then dig up the roots from those plants and store them for the winter, then replant the roots the second year, when the plants will make seeds.

My fellow picks out an heirloom variety of carrots, called “Danvers,” from a catalog.

Neither of us have ever tasted these carrots before, but surely they will be delicious. “It says so right here in the catalog,” my fellow tells me.

“Uh–huh,” I say. “Where are you going to plant them?”

My clever seed-saving fellow has an idea, of course: we need to plant ten bed feet to save seed, but he is so keen on his heirloom carrots that he wants to plant four hundred feet, planning to distribute the bulk to our CSA members.

“At least they might get weeded then,” I suggest, and fortunately, this is true: many months of weeding, weeding, weeding later, the slow-growing heirloom carrots are finally ready to harvest. Unfortunately, our CSA distribution season has already ended. What will we do with all four hundred feet of these carrots?

“We’ll eat them, all winter long,” my fellow says happily. “We’ll have carrots every day!” Since we’ve given all our regular carrots to the CSA members already, this seems like a fine idea.

We dig up the first heirloom. It’s a nice looking carrot, orange and plump. I rub off the dirt, take a bite, and offer a nibble to our little daughter, who starts off with enthusiasm, working her many fine teeth.

“How is it?” my fellow asks eagerly.

“Well,” I say, chewing ever more slowly, “Okay...”

Our little daughter has also slowed down considerably. She wrinkles up her eyes and her mouth, considering the wisdom of eating this particular carrot.

“What do you mean, *okay*?” My farming fellow is insulted. This is his heirloom crop of delicious carrots! He is saving the seed!

“Well, they’re aren’t *bad* . . . just not *quite* as sweet as the others we grow . . .”

He tries one too. “Hmmm,” he says, taking a big bite. “Oh, I see,” he says. Then he chews fast, and swallows manfully. “I guess we have to eat them, all winter long,” my fellow says, with some dismay. “I guess we’ll have to have carrots, every day.”

“Oh,” I say quickly. “I don’t think we can eat *that* many carrots this winter. Especially this kind,” I add, in a low voice.

My fellow thinks hard. “I know! We’ll give a little CSA bonus! An extra vegetable pick-up – all carrots! The people will love it!”

I think this is a brilliant idea, too, and my fellow remembers to save a few not-*quite*-as-sweet carrots from the bonus CSA pick-up to replant the next year, just to finish out his seed-saving experiment, and just in case this variety magically transforms into something sweet and delicious. Carefully my fellow double bags the seed carrots and stores them in the root cellar, dreaming of his first biannual crop seeds.

Alas, once again, the next spring we are distracted from our wonderful seed saving plans by the pressures of everything else on the farm, and by the time we bring the seed carrots up from the cellar, in mid June or so, the contents of the bag appear suspiciously mushy.

“Drat,” says my fellow, followed by, “Yuck.” We all wrinkle up our faces now. But with the help of my give-up-on-no-crop spirit, we sort through the mush to come up with twelve carrots, and set out to plant them.

Where do we plant them? Exactly where there is room: that tiny bit of extra space, at the far end of the garden. Out of twelve, one brave carrot sprouts. Even with weeding and lots of encouraging whispers in its ears, the one brave little carrot dies. Sigh. At least it was a not-*quite*-as-sweet carrot.

Attempt Number Three: Tomatoes

Motivated once more by the fact that all the seed companies are discontinuing a favorite variety, this time my fellow sets his sights on a greenhouse tomato. “Buffalo” is steady, productive, and good tasting, so my fellow decides to stabilize the hybrid. This will be ideal, because the tomatoes will flourish in the greenhouse, rather than languish in the root cellar or at the far end of the garden.

He mentions this idea to me, early in the season, before we are overcome with planting, weeding, and harvesting. “Okay, great,” I say, not fully comprehending what saving the seeds of a tomato means.

A few months pass, and suddenly the seed-tomato harvest is upon us, along with everything else: four sections of garden and two greenhouses in full swing, plus a kitchen overrun by five-gallon buckets of vegetables that must be processed immediately for the winter – the buckets competing for space with the teetering piles of dirty dishes that no farmer has the energy or inclination this time of year to wash – not to mention a little daughter who also seems to like occasional attention.

Now I find out exactly what saving seed from tomatoes means: several plastic yogurt containers, not to be disturbed, bubbling with foul-smelling pink and white liquid. These plastic yogurt containers happen to be on the kitchen counter.

“Hey. What’s this?” I say, alarmed, when I finally notice the containers among the kitchen wreckage.

“Oh! Those!” my fellow answers brightly. “Remember? Those are the tomato seeds! They need to ferment.” He goes on, with a hopeful smile: “You know how tomatoes rot on the ground? It’s all part of the process, of readying the seeds for next year. So we’re doing the same thing in here. Isn’t that great?”

I am shaking my head.

“They just need a few days,” he pleads. Somehow, with his charming talk of rot and fermentation, he wins me over once again, but it is only a matter of time.

The very next day, I am just coming into the house from the fields when I am hit by a terrible, gag-inducing smell. There is also a strange noise, which is coming from my fellow, who is making lunch in the kitchen. I am not sure whether the noise falls into the gagging or the cursing category, or perhaps it is the gagging-while-cursing category. I race in, holding my nose.

Yes, it has happened. A yogurt container has been accidentally knocked over, spewing its contents on kitchen counter, sink, clean and dirty dishes, floor. There is even some dreadful tomato goo on an innocent pile of waiting-to-be-lunch fresh tomatoes.

The seed tomato project is doomed. The remaining containers are relegated to a high shelf far away on the back porch, and in the ongoing rush of the season, seed-saving slips our minds. The poor little tomato seeds dry up and wither away.

Much, much later, my fellow pokes forlornly at the bottom of the container. “Drat,” he says. “You think these might still germinate?” And then, “Next year, I’m going to save . . .”

“Money?” I suggest quickly. “Or time. Or rocks. Seashells. Postage stamps. How about antique busted up horse machinery? We’ve already got a good start on that . . .”

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